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Between Ownness and Alienness: Towards the Dialectic of Cultural Heritage

Abstract: The article *Between Ownness and Alienness: Towards the Dialectic of Cultural Heritage* is an attempt to present cultural heritage, or cultural identity, as an effect of two basic factors: that which is one's own, and that which is alien. "Ownness" and "alienness" are the most general categories of our interpretation of the world, one of the most important categories that enable us to perceive, describe, and organize reality. The dividing line between the two would define the area of cultural heritage.

Drawing on the thought of Heraclitus (especially fragments B 8 and B 122) the author first discusses the dialectic of oppositional categories of "ownness" and "alienness", proceeding to describe the immanently cultural occasion of an "encounter with the alien", drawing on the ideas of Kant, Scheler, Heidegger, Gadamer, Lacan and Waldenfels, to round up his argument by linking his reflection to the question of cultural heritage, which – in view of the whole reasoning – appears as a historical record of the encounter with alienness. The author refers to the literary *oeuvre* of Gombrowicz and the painting of Nowosielski as examples creative output linked to the question of ownness and alienness.

Key words: ownness, alienness, opposition, cultural heritage, culture, dialectics, meeting with alien, Heraclitus, Kant, Heidegger, Gadamer, Lacan, Waldenfels, Nowosielski, Gombrowicz

Introduction

The article "Between Ownness and Alienness: Towards the Dialectic of Cultural Heritage" is an attempt to present cultural heritage, or cultural identity, as an effect of two basic factors: that which is one's own, and that which is

alien.¹ “Ownness” and “alienness” are the most general categories of our interpretation of the world, one of the most important categories that enable us to perceive, describe and organize reality. The dividing line between the two would define the area of cultural heritage.

Drawing on the thought of Heraclitus (especially fragments B 8 and B 122) the author first discusses the dialectic of oppositional categories of “ownness” and “alienness”, proceeding to describe the immanently cultural occasion of an “encounter with the alien,” drawing on the ideas of Immanuel Kant, Max Scheler, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jacques Lacan and Bernhard Waldenfels, to round up his argument by linking his reflection to the question of cultural heritage, which – in view of the whole reasoning – appears as a historical record of the encounter with alienness. The author refers to the literary *oeuvre* of Witold Gombrowicz and the painting of Jerzy Nowosielski as examples of creative output linked to the question of ownness and alienness.

The case of Nowosielski

Jerzy Nowosielski is one of the leading figures in contemporary Polish art, perhaps the most distinguished Polish painter of the last decades. Professor Mieczysław Porębski was a tireless exponent of his painting in the West. In 1969 Porębski curated the exhibition *Sources et recherches* in the Parisian Musée Galliera which exhibition was to show the indigenous roots of Polish culture. The exhibited works also included the paintings by Nowosielski. According to Porębski, André Malraux, the honorary guest at the exhibition,

appears only for a casual visit, during which he stops for longer only by Hasior's [works] – after all, in the West it's pop-art that one wears nowadays. Painting is somewhat *passé*. And at dinner he makes an elaborate speech about how the true frontier of Europe can only be the Latin alphabet. And he drinks to the Latin Europeanness.²

In 1983, the exhibition *Présences polonaises* took place at the Centre Pompidou. It was a major showcase of Polish art. Porębski reminisced that already during the talks prior to the exhibition it turned out that the Parisian partners

will not be able to digest just that Sarmatism of ours (...). Painting cannot be translated and it cannot be supplied with a context in which it begins to be interpretable. That is why it's so tremendously difficult to read Nowosielski... They managed to see in him (...)

¹ The publication is based on the article: C. Woźniak, “Między swojskością a obcością. Przyczynki do dialektyki dziedzictwa kulturowego,” *Zarządzanie w Kulturze* 2015, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 129–136.

² K. Czerni, *Nietoperz w świątyni. Biografia Jerzego Nowosielskiego*, Kraków 2011, p. 349.

some affinity with Modigliani, perhaps some post-Cubist effects – no more! The whole complexity of his art bordering two worlds, two cultures, and the whole contribution of his icons, his cultural thinking, thinking through tradition, remained beyond their reach. That painting remained defenseless.³

Krystyna Czerni, Nowosielski's biographer, aptly points out that the figure of Nowosielski, quite emblematic for the Polish culture, concentrates the dilemmas and tragedies that occurred in this part of the 20th century Europe. Nowosielski went through a long and complicated path of spiritual quests: "from Lemkovina, through Polishness, to transnational eschatology; from Catholicism, through atheism, to Orthodoxy – and beyond."⁴ This artist absorbed and transformed the art of East and West, creating a unique synthesis, however, as we can even see in Porębski's recollections quoted above, it was – and perhaps still is – incomprehensible outside its regional cultural context. The reception of Nowosielski's art would be, as Porębski notes, beyond the reach of comprehension of another cultural tradition. The case of Nowosielski seems to suggest a possibility that some cultural traditions, some cultural identities, emerge as the effect of two basic factors or forces at work: the own and the alien. The boundary between the two would at the same time describe a certain area of cultural heritage. Because "ownness" and "alienness" are the most general categories of our interpretation of the world, as well as the most important categories through which we are able to perceive, describe and organize reality, however they remain categories founded on opposition. This article is an essay of the cultural heritage dialectic based on the categories of ownness and alienness.

Approaching

Let us begin from the very essence of oppositionality of ownness and alienness. What is the message conveyed here? What would oppositionality be as oppositionality itself, the opposition as opposition? Heraclitus was the first thinker in the Western culture to attempt taking this idea into consideration. According to Heraclitus the world is characterized by constant arising and waning, and the "constant" feature of that process would be change. Arising and waning would be a result of constant friction between isolated oppositions, such as life and death, light and darkness, day and night. Generally speaking, Heraclitus already proposes a certain dialectic where all events have their source in the tension generated between the oppositions, the op-

³ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

⁴ See: *ibid.*, p. 7.

posing forces yielding the arising or presencing of what we usually call reality. Possibly one has to put within that dialectic the categories of ownness and alienness, and that would mean they are inseparable from the moment of a certain dynamic, a certain process of reality, which could further be differentiated by relating it to such regions as social life, sciences, culture, as well as to the dimension of individual psyche.

Let us note however, that all oppositions aren't oppositions in the strict sense, and that's because they are only elements or poles of a relation, a connection, or tension, and as such are fluid, and transitive. One cannot, for example, separate death from life, or isolate life from death, because life and death constitute an integral unity. The case would be analogous with ownness and alienness. To put it otherwise: one cannot define those categories separately: the "own" is primarily "not alien," the "alien" is principally not "one's own." This fundamental distinction is already inscribed in the structure of our experience of the world, its relational, mereological, or phenomenal dimensions.

It seems there is no alternative to this dialectic. As long as reality happens, to that same extent there lasts the coupling of that fundamental opposition. Moreover, the opposition "ownness – alienness" would even "precede" any thought of a whole, because that whole would only be the result of that coupling. It should be understood almost in a literal sense: the hiatus between our own and the alien can be perceived as the source of reality, also the source of our existence in the sense of the primary, and fundamental stretch of our existence between ownness and alienness. In *Being and Time* Martin Heidegger talks about being thrown into existence, which means being placed within the extremes of ownness and alienness from the moment of birth.⁵ Whilst reality, or the world, would be some kind of openness, a game, as it were, of the ownness' and alienness' chiaroscuro, the primary alienness, otherness, uncanniness, which cannot become non-alien to us (also for the reason that our cognition of reality is a finite thing), would constitute the irremovable background of that play. Immanuel Kant claims that the unknowability of *Ding an sich*, the unknowability of "the thing in itself" as a reality external to us, a reality "prior" to, and independent from, us, defines the limits of our cognition.⁶ In other words: *Ding an sich* would be the core of reality, which is hard, and foreign to us, and which would not undergo language symbolization process. Jacques Lacan seems to understand this hard core of reality somewhat differently.⁷ According to him, the Real – one of the three, beside the Imagined and the Symbolic, dimensions of all things – is what resists language, but as something not linguistic at all, something extra-semantic that

⁵ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Oxford 1990.

⁶ I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. P. Guyer & A. Wood, Cambridge 1999.

⁷ S. Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, London 2006.

is, not as some original, prelinguistic reality, but as an original lack or void “working” within language itself, disturbing it, precluding its consistency, its closure and ultimately – the fullness of discourse. It would be wrong to delude ourselves that there is any possibility of entirely or finally eliminating alienness from our experience or from our culture, even though we’re in the process of rapid globalization of contemporary world which is hypothetically supposed to lead to its elimination from the intercultural sphere in the future. The alienness, however is too fundamental for the being of man and his construction of reality to be transgressed. It might be this state of thing that the geometrician K. from Franz Kafka’s *The Castle* teaches us about.

Let us think about Heraclitus again, and focus on the B 8 and B 122 fragments. The first of them can be translated as: “The counter-thrust brings together, and from tones at variance comes perfect attunement, and all things come to pass through conflict,” while the other, consisting only of one word, can be translated as: “stepping near.”⁸ Perhaps in those two fragments Heraclitus is trying to somehow utter the way the world happens. In the second fragment we are confronted with a spatial metaphor, which can also be used with reference to the categories of alienness and ownness. Insofar as anything “is,” it “is” already something somehow “brought closer” to us, “approximated” to us, something at some distance from us, “closer” or “further,” and that “distance,” that “length” is determined according to paradigmatic poles of alienness and ownness. In a sense, culture is a continual “measurement” of that “distance,” although the concepts of alienness and ownness, as has been suggested above, seem to be rooted in something beyond human, ultimately different. We build the world of culture, then, we arrange it and assess it according to a spatial metaphor, which finds further expression in such analogons of “distance,” “proximity” and “out there” as “my,” “own,” “our,” “not mine,” “unfamiliar,” “strange,” “not ours.” These expressions, qualifying our relation with the world can become a part of the two approaches to reality: the “attitude towards” and the “attitude against,” the apulsive attitude and the repulsive attitude, creating our cultural identity, and simultaneously constituting a demarcation line between the own and the alien, the “space of ownness” and the “space of alienness,” always, however, taking place with reference to alienness. Because alienness does not appear only between different cultures but also emerges within the sphere of our individual psyche. Although alienness is enormously rich in meanings and, if only for that fact, difficult to thematize synthetically, we can generally point to three main semantic contexts of the term “alien”: (1) alien to us, i.e. one who does not share our system of values and cultural meanings. This kind of alienness is analyzed through

⁸ Ch.H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: A New Arrangement and Translation of the Fragments with Literary and Philosophical Commentary*, Cambridge 1981, pp. 289 and 63.

such categories as Orientalism, Occidentalism, Eurocentrism, and it is also the subject of postcolonial studies; (2) aliens among us – people and phenomena we are culturally connected to, however cannot be treated as our ‘own’ as some of the features they represent place them in opposition to us. When we apply this methodology to the analysis of alienness, the concepts of irrationality, sexuality, abnormality, subculture, caste, etc. come useful; (3) the alien in us – that part of our being or psyche which remains unintegrated with the sphere of our self-presence – is something independent of it.⁹

To conclude: the alien as the reverse side of the own – in cultural as well as individual context – cannot be completely assimilated or removed. And if so, then, according to Bernhard Waldenfels, who practices phenomenology as xenology (from the Greek *xenos* – ‘stranger, guest’), one should recognize the alien as constitutive of our identity, acknowledge its mystery and open oneself to it.¹⁰ In this context Waldenfels speaks of an encounter with the alien.

Encounter with the alien

Encounter with the alien seems to be of mainly aporetic character, which can be traced in the ideas of Waldenfels himself. On one hand he talks about “mapping of the alien,” which in itself would be some kind of preparation for the opening towards the alien, allowing such a meeting with him, which would no longer be free from the possibility of its confrontational or hostile reception.

On the other hand, however, he points towards an unexpected, event-driven and random character of such encounter, an encounter that eludes our intentions, invades us unexpectedly, and even becomes our fate. In other words: encounters with the alien essentially cannot be programmed, just as one cannot program the future – it appears to be, ultimately, something indefinite, even risky. At the same time however, the alien is indispensable to us in the constitution of our identity and the structures of sense connected to it, because the development or evolution of culture, as well as of the individual, can be understood as a continuous transcendence or transgression, of what is own towards what is still alien. Thus the questions of ownness and alienness form a complicated, dynamic constellation in which we have been moving for centuries creating culture, and building cultural heritage.

From the global perspective, the aim of that voyage into the alien in search of the own would perhaps be cultural universalism, the realization of which

⁹ See: M. Jakubczak, *Sens Ja. Koncepcja podmiotu w filozofii indyjskiej (sankhja-joga)*, Kraków 2013, pp. 27–28.

¹⁰ B. Waldenfels, *Topographie des Fremden: Studien zur Phänomenologie des Fremden 1*, Frankfurt am Main 1997.

seems to be the contemporary popular culture of the Internet age. Waldenfels, to quote him once again, thinks that cultural universalism can be reconciled with interpenetration of the own and the alien worlds, but at the same time tentatively proposes the term “poly-universalism,” in order to avoid the possibility of the idea of universalism being appropriated by any given culture.¹¹

It is worthwhile to emphasize that the idea of universalism, first of all requires some openness to what is alien, as well as the ability to relate critically to one's own cultural tradition, and to overcome one's own ethnocentrism. It also needs translation, or some kind rendering of the alien into ownness, but without appropriating it, and past the attempts of preserving it within the own. Such assimilation of another tradition should result in creating a new community of the own and the alien, the synthesis of both – that would reduce the scope of alienness in the contemporary culture of our planet. In 1922 Max Scheler, had already foretold that the planetary realm of alienness will diminish due to dialogue and the blurring of differences between Europe and Asia, the giant centers of culture.¹² Scheler claimed then that within a short time it would be possible to create a cosmopolitan, universal culture where the intellectual and spiritual achievements of Asia not only will be understood but, most importantly, assimilated without abandoning one's own, Western cultural tradition. A similar vision of a unified, universal, intercultural, but also harmonious, cultural cosmos of man was somewhat later developed by Arnold Toynbee.¹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer in his lectures from the 1980s held that Europe's history and cultural heritage, including Europe's multilingualism, particularly predestine it to the development of intercultural dialogue and overcoming of intercultural alienness.¹⁴

There would be a possibility, then, of a positive encounter with the alien, modelled on the ideal of a humanistic, harmonious and peaceful encounter with it. In practical terms, it would mean constant endeavor to endorse an open approach to all that is alien, as well as establish a dialogue and communication with the alien without obliterating its multiplicity and diversity, which yet does not eradicate the basic aporia between the ideal and its practical realization, and that opens up some possibility of a negative encounter with the alien.

First of all, there is a possibility that the encounter with the alien will have destructive, and tragic consequences, it may even be something utterly negative. Because the intrusion of the alien may be unwanted, may be something

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹² M. Scheler, “Man in the Era of Adjustment,” in: *Philosophical Perspectives*, transl. O.A. Haac, Boston 1958, pp. 94–126.

¹³ A. Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial*, Oxford 1948.

¹⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, “The Diversity of Europe: Inheritance and Future Sources,” in: D. Misgeld, G. Nicholson (eds.), *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, transl. L. Schmidt & M. Reuss, Albany 1992, p. 234.

unequivocally alien to the own, and may even be some kind of violation of our own by the alien. Surely, an example of such an intrusion by the alien is the attack of Islamic fundamentalists on the World Trade Center, on September 11th 2001. But the exemplary example of all the alien intrusions seems to be the Auschwitz death camp, the ultimate symbol of all crimes, and abysmal evil that man is capable of perpetrating. Both events are a part of history, a part of mankind's cultural heritage which presents an atrocity consisting in the fact that man's own can at the same time be that, which is most alien to him, which actually invades, and from which there is no escape: Auschwitz really happened, Auschwitz remains in culture as its darkest, indelible fact, which cannot be undone.

Time that has passed is a type of a shield, which distances contemporaries from the past. And if so, it may seem that it is capable of dismissing what is unwanted and terribly alien, into oblivion. But if reaching to the own, as we already know, requires a journey into the alien, and requires undergoing the trauma of the other, then time is not our ally here – in oblivion the alien becomes even more alien. Time works in favor of the alien here, staving off the possibility of forgetting it, working through with it, and somehow assimilating it. In this way time sets it free: yet it sets it free from us, rather, than us from it.

Gombrowicz's Case

Witold Gombrowicz is one of the best-known Polish writers and his works have been translated into many languages. In a letter to Jadwiga Kukułczanka, the translator of his works into French, he wrote the following: "Trans-Atlantyk seems near-impossible to translate to me, or at least, that would require an enormous amount of work."¹⁵ That "near-impossible to translate" refers us to yet another possibility of determining the nature of the alien and that would certainly be an idiom. Let us however try and understand the widespread scope of its nature, going beyond the strictly linguistic context. Let us perceive it as all that which cannot be translated, which resists assimilation, which retreats into itself, which annihilates every attempt at penetrating it, which would be unopenable, yet at the same time somehow perceived. In this sense reality itself would also be idiomatic, that is, alien.

Once again Gombrowicz, this time in a passage from his novel *Cosmos*:

The earth. Clods of dirt. Pebbles. On a clear day, you rest among ordinary, everyday things, things that have been familiar to you since childhood, grass, bushes, a dog (or

¹⁵ W. Gombrowicz, in a letter to Jadwiga Kukułczanka, 3 March 1963. Property of Cezary Woźniak.

a cat), a chair, but that changes when you realize that every object is an enormous army, an inexhaustible swarm.¹⁶

Gombrowicz seems to be saying here that we live surrounded by uncanniness which we incessantly crack open with ownness. What we call cultural heritage would be a historical record of that process of cracking the reality open, a record of our human desire to inhabit the world.

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¹⁶ W. Gombrowicz, *Cosmos*, transl. D. Borchardt, New Heaven & London 2005, pp. 146–147.